

# On Why Han Chinese Officials Were Not Given Important Roles in the Government of Kublai

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**Abstract**— In the reign of Kublai Khan from 1260A.D. to 1294A.D, favorable policies for the Chinese population, including regular taxation system, population growth policy, and policies to promote agriculture, were widely adopted by the government of Mongol Empire in China. However, unlike the Semu officials (officials from Central Asia, Western Asia, and Europe), Han Chinese officials were not trusted by Kublai to hold important positions. In this article, I will use Persian and Chinese sources to find out why Kublai was conservative in appointing Han Chinese officials to help govern his empire. I argue that there are three major reasons: pressures from conservative nobles to alienate Han Chinese, the actual need of encouraging commerce, and Kublai's fear of the possible rebellion from the Han Chinese.

**Keywords**— Mongol Empire, Yuan dynasty, ethnic policy, Kublai Khan, conquest dynasties, Confucianism, sinicization.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Being the fifth Khan of the Mongol Empire and the first emperor of the Yuan Dynasty in China, Kublai Khan governed the empire from 1260 A.D. to 1294 A.D. In his reign, Kublai promoted policies towards the Chinese population including a regular taxation system, population growth policy, and a policy to promote agriculture. As a matter of fact, Han Chinese people were dominant in the government at the early stage of Kublai's reign. However, those officials were not trusted by Kublai and were therefore not given important positions in his government. Recent scholarship fails to explain convincingly why Han Chinese were not included in the Mongolian administration in the later years, the understanding of which, nevertheless, is critical if we are to comprehend the long-term loss of legitimacy of the Yuan government as well as its inability to sustain power in China. I argue that Kublai Khan couldn't promote Han Chinese to high positions because he was unable to balance the competing demands of Han officials and those in the Mongol elites. He eventually surrendered to the demands of the Mongol elites because, first, they were conservative and kept obstructing the promotion of Han Chinese officials; secondly, Kublai agreed with their idea of encouraging commerce, which was, however, opposed by Han Chinese officials; and lastly, Kublai was afraid of Han Chinese rebellions once too much power was given to their officials.

Current scholarship on Mongolian studies has broadened cultural and ethnic understanding of Mongolia through works such as Peter Jackson's *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, but the literature in English often fails to address ethnic policies towards the Han Chinese. Likewise, Morris Rossabi discusses social and economic policies that were beneficial for Han

Chinese subjects, but he fails to take into account how unfair political promotions might tell a different story. While English scholarships often ignore ethnic policies, Chinese scholars put too much emphasis on discrimination, seeing ethnic discrimination as the chief motivation behind the ruler's unwillingness to promote Chinese officials in his government, which, however, may turn out to be anachronistic. For instance, Liangxiao Zhou states that Mongol rulers had their instinctive ethnic bias and discrimination when ruling the empire. Even if such discrimination did exist, it is not a satisfying explanatory factor. This essay, therefore, fits into recent scholarship on "racism" or "ethnic discrimination," but looks further for causal factors, often related to competition for resources, that have led to discrimination. Moreover, I'm also working within the context of the wide-ranging scholarship which could help us understand why the Mongols were able to create great unities across Asia of varying durations. Timothy May and Peter Turchin are two scholars whose works are important to this research. I benefit from May's studies which elaborate on the details of the territorial expansion and cultural integration of the Mongol Empire, while Turchin offers me insights when analyzing regular patterns behind the formation of nomadic empires. The research of Qiqing Xiao is also acknowledged in this paper. He encourages the study of the ethnic system in the Mongolian and Yuan Dynasties from the perspective of political interests. Although his research does not focus on Kublai Khan's period per se, this paper is still inspired by his idea that political interests, instead of ethnic discrimination, are the key of studying ethnic policy of Mongol Empire.

## II. OBSTRUCTION OF CONSERVATIVE NOBLES

Kublai Khan's alienation from Han Chinese was the outcome of the obstruction of conservative nobles, not

only Mongol nobles but also nobles from Semu or other ethnic groups, to Han Chinese officials.

Zhou Liangxiao said that “behind Kublai were a number of nobles who lived separately on the grassland, supported traditions and opposed Han officials.” Conservative nobles regarded Han Chinese officials as threats. In other words, they did not want Han Chinese to become dominant in culture and politics. Hence, they forced Kublai to impose ethnic policies that were not conducive to achieving harmony and unity between different ethnic groups but to suppress and alienate those who have divergent political views or widely different cultural value backgrounds. To be more specific, nobles hoped that the ethnic policies could prevent Han Chinese officials from becoming important officials.

The nobles’ hostility towards Han Chinese officials and expectation of ethnic policies that would only favor the nobles themselves were becoming much stronger in the reign of Kublai. The major reason for this situation was that Han Chinese were difficult to get integrated into the noble group, to form a power holding opposite opinions about Han Chinese officials among the nobles, and to weaken those nobles’ hostility towards Han Chinese officials. In fact, the earlier an ethnic group was integrated to the Mongol Empire, the easier the aristocrats in that ethnic group were to become members of noble group, since these aristocrats had more time and chances to make contributions to the empire through military actions, policy making, and empire management, all of which would help them get official positions and corresponding titles. As are shown in historical materials, a number of Semu people became nobles in this way. Semu people mostly made contributions to the empire by joining the army. Some of them even became members of the Imperial Guards. Having followed generations of khans to conquer nearby countries and complete the goal of unification, Semu soldiers and generals naturally held high positions in central and local institutions of the empire. Besides those in the military, Semu merchants also gained power and became nobles in the similar way, chiefly through serving the khans for a long term and making impressive contributions such as increasing national or local revenue. According to Secret History, “a merchant coming from Central Asia rode a white camel and drove thousands of sheep to Argun river and met Genghis Khan who camped here.” It is clearly shown that some Semu merchants even began their loyal service in the time of Genghis Khan. However, it was hard for Han Chinese to follow the way by which Semu people became nobles. Most Han Chinese was the last ethnic group to surrender. Therefore, Han Chinese people did

not have the chance to make contributions and hence no possibility to become nobles. Admittedly, some Han officials of Jin (the country established by Jurchens) or Song (the country established by Han Chinese) surrendered to the empire earlier. In 1220 A.D., Yan Shi, a local minister of Jin, surrendered to Mongol Empire with three hundred thousand people in his jurisdiction. In recognition of his obedience, Kublai appointed him as a general and granted him a title. But these are rare cases, most Han Chinese people usually had no chance to contribute to the empire and became nobles. Therefore, there were few Han Chinese people in the noble group, which intensified, rather than challenged and diluted, those nobles’ animosity of Han Chinese. Consequently, they more firmly urged Kublai to alienate Han Chinese officials in the government.

Unfortunately, the behaviors and decisions of the khan in the Mongol Empire were affected, or restricted, by nobles. Kublai tried to get rid of the control of Mongol nobles. In the first years of his reign, he showed obvious pro-Han tendencies. However, his pro-Han attitudes became the excuse for those Mongol nobles on the grassland to rebel against his government. Kaidu, the son of Ogodei, wanted to get the throne from Kublai. He told other nobles on the grassland that Kublai’s Chinese policies would threaten their privileges. In order to more clearly show his contempt for Kublai’s Pro-Han behavior, Kaidu also sent an envoy to hurl a question to Kublai that “The customs of our nation was different from those of Confucianism. Now you live in the land of Chinese, build city walls, follow Chinese customs of rituals and policies. How could you do so?” In doing so, he earned the support of a number of nobles. Kaidu’s rebellion was a huge blow to Kublai. He knew that Kaidu’s major goal was to gain the throne. However, he also realized the potential danger of displeasing the nobles if he chose to support Han Chinese officials.

The nobles’ increasing intervention in Kublai Khan’s policy further hindered the way for Han Chinese people to become important officials in the government. First, nobles forced Kublai Khan to deprive the Han Chinese of the opportunity to get official position or promotion. To achieve the former goal, they tried to prevent Kublai from holding imperial examinations, which is the major way for Han Chinese people to gain a position in the government. To achieve the latter goal at the same time, nobles demanded Kublai to stand with Semu officials in the conflict between them and the Han Chinese officials. Besides suppressing Han Chinese officials, nobles themselves also took away opportunities for Han Chinese officials to assume the office of important roles.

Kublai wanted the imperial examinations to be held, because he was originally willing to integrate the traditional Chinese ruling system into his own governance. According to the description in Yuan Shi, Kublai ordered accountable officials to hold the examination, but unfortunately the plan was forced to stop. Yuan Shi did not explain why the plan “was forced to stop,” but it was certain that the nobles played a role in it. After this, Kublai tried three times for the examination but all failed. Yelu Chucai, who is a supporter of the imperial examinations, wrote a poem to complain that if the imperial exam could not be carried out, the current flawed political situation can not be changed only through the existing policies. One of the sentences of his poem was “Outdated tradition is not able to solve new problems, and excessive faculties are not able to eliminate long-standing maladies.” Sadly, enough, Yelu Chucai’s dream was never realized until the governance of Ayurparibhadra, a khan who respected Chinese culture and policy more than Kublai. However, less than a thousand officials were provided for the government through examinations in his reign. It was a number that could be ignored. Because Han Chinese could not take the exam and enter the government, they were gradually marginalized by the government.

Mongol nobles also exerted pressure on Kublai Khan to favor the Semu side in the competition between Han Chinese officials and Semu officials. In Kublai’s reign, these two groups of officials are ideologically divergent regarding how to run the country. For Han Chinese, Confucianism is the best way to run a country that was mainly composed of peasants. On the contrary, Semu officials were convinced that the most effective way to run a massive empire was to continuously produce benefits through economical means. Kublai adopted the views of both sides and hoped that these two sides of officials could achieve a balance of power. However, only Semu officials’ policies could have a positive impact on. Under the rule of the Mongol Empire, the central government collected trade tax from all over the country and distributed the revenue to nobles everywhere. Therefore, nobles could increase their incomes by encouraging trade. And since Semu officials always made efforts to develop commerce, almost all the nobles supported them. In contrast, the Confucian way of running the country supported by Han Chinese officials could not bring any actual benefit to the nobles. What was more, Han Chinese officials tried to stop Semu officials from implementing policies promoting the development of commerce and trade. Yelu Chucai, for example, once accused Abd al-Rahman, a Semu official, that “his tricks were all imposed by treacherous

ministers who lied to the emperor and suppressed common people. They will cause disastrous harm to the nation, so I demand repealing these laws.” Yelu Chucai’s remark was supported by more Han Chinese officials who hence felt encouraged to oppose such concept of emphasizing commerce over agriculture. Seeing that Han Chinese officials were trying to stop them from gaining more profits, Mongol nobles forced Kublai to alienate Han Chinese officials in the government. Under the pressure from Mongol nobles, Kublai had no choice but to give up relying on Han Chinese officials and appointed instead more Semu officials to fill the gap, which made it more difficult for Han Chinese to compete with Semu people in getting important positions in the government.

More importantly, since Yuan government (the central government of Mongol Empire in China) took family background and blood relationship as the key/primary criteria of selecting officials, descendants of nobles had much easier access to important positions such as generals and ministers in the government. Although Kublai tried to adopt policies that would favor Han Chinese people, he could not completely bureaucratize and centralize his regime, otherwise he would lose the support of the nobles and endangered the legitimacy of his government. As a result, the aristocratic inheritance system coexisted with the bureaucratic system in his reign, which allowed nobles to enjoy great power of official succession. After the implementation of his own system, Kublai’s civil official admission mainly depended on succession, and was supplemented by recommendation and other auxiliary methods. Therefore, those nobles who were originally prime ministers or pingzhangzhengshi (a senior official responsible for political and military affairs) could pass on their positions to their offspring. The succession of noble families who were generals was more stable than that of civil officials. A number of generals in Kublai’s time were descendants of famous generals in the time of Ogodei Khan, Mongke Khan, or even Genghis Khan. For example, Aju, the commander of the Mongol army in the battle of Xiangyang, was the son of Uriyangqatai, the chief of royal guards of Mongke Khan, and the grandson of Subedei, one of the four most valued generals of Genghis Khan. Similar to Aju, descendants of other previous generals, mainly Mongolians and Semu people, easily inherited the position and became the new generation of generals to fight with the Khan and hence enjoy privileges of high positions. In addition to inheriting the position of high-ranking civil officials and generals, nobles also became important officials after joining the Keshig army. The Keshig army was originally the escort of the Khan. During the time of

Kublai Khan, Keshig army also functioned as school of cadres' descendants and concentration camp of noble hostages from subject countries. To be specific, only descendants of third grade officials (according to Chinese official system, all officials were divided into nine rankings, and officials in the first rank were the most superior) and officials of higher rankings met the standard of Keshig admissions. In other words, few officials in the Keshig army were not from noble family, and almost all the places were occupied by the Mongol nobles. After becoming members of Keshig army, their descendants were to be easily enrolled by the government as important officials. Although they needed to pass a special selection called "Belge" and then got official positions, almost all of them could pass the selection. Those aforementioned advantages enabled noble families to maintain their power in the government and to have most chances to become high-ranking officials. According to statistics, descendants of Four Great Mongolian Families (family of Muqali, Boorchu, and Chilaun) occupied 21.11% of all second and third grade positions as well as 14.44% of all first grade positions in the reign of Kublai Khan. Apart from these outstanding noble families, other nobles, including Mongolians and Semu people, also took up great portion of high-ranking positions. Therefore, Han Chinese, hardly seen in noble group, were unable to occupy high positions in Kublai's government.

### **III. ENCOURAGEMENT OF COMMERCE**

Throughout the history of Yuan Dynasty, two groups of officials competed for superiority in the government. These two groups were constituted respectively by the Han Chinese officials who firmly believed in Confucianism in terms of governing a country and the Semu officials who supported the development of trade and commerce. Their first recorded competition happened during the time of Ogodei. In Ogodei's reign, Yelu Chucai, a sinicized official, was appointed the chief tax collector of the empire. He instituted a regulated tax system and brought revenue to the government. However, Abd al-Rahman provided the same amount of income to Ogodei within one month. Seeing that commerce was more efficient, Ogodei appointed Abd al-Rahman as the chief tax collector. After Ogodei, succeeding khans inherited this preference and thus sided with Semu officials and supported commerce.

Kublai, though promoting pro-Chinese policies, also largely shared the same preference of Ogodei: promoting Semu officials and investing on traders. However, it should be noted that he was forced to make that decision because of the situation his empire was facing at his time. In Kublai's reign, the empire was

experiencing massive warfare and reconstructions. Kublai Khan needed to face the challenges of Song Dynasty, Kaidu in central Asia, and Ariq-Boke (Kublai's rebellious younger brother) in northern grassland. Since these wars took place far away from the center of Kublai's government, the supply of soldiers costed the government a lot. Every year, Kublai had to spend a fortune to reward the meritorious generals and soldiers in different wars. During the war against Song Dynasty, Kublai once rewarded a meritorious prince twenty-five thousand ding (a currency unit used in ancient China) silver. Later, he rewarded each one of eight thousand, three hundred and fifty-two soldiers with two ding in the same war. For the battle against Ariq-Boke, He also rewarded each general over twenty thousand ding. Similar cases are numerous because Kublai had to provide a large number of rewards in order to encourage generals and soldiers to fight for him. Besides military expenses, Kublai also faced the challenge of reconstruction on the newly conquered lands as well as lands being plundered by previous khans. The areas that received worst damages of wars were the original territory of Xixia (the regime of Tangut people) and Jin (the regime of Jurchen people). In the time of Genghis Khan, Mongol army once occupied Suzhou city in Xixia and carried out cruel massacres. Only one hundred and six families survived. Besides population decrease as described above, warfare also severely damaged local agriculture by pillaging farming tools. After the invasion of Jin, Ogodei ordered the army chief to take over cattle looted by soldiers at Lugou bridge, a bridge which Mongol soldiers must pass in the way back to the grassland. The chief took over one cattle for every ten cattle and finally got over one thousand cattle. Based on this record, it is clear that Kublai needed to spend a lot to provide means of production, including cattle used for plowing the farmland, for farmers in northern China. Not surprisingly, he used a large amount of revenue for post-war recovery. In the thirteenth year of his governance, Kublai spent over four thousand ding in the reconstruction of Shandong (an area originally belonged to Jin). Two years later, he spent ten thousand ding of silver, along with crops, to reconstruct Shandong for the second time. Similarly, in other northern territories of China Kublai made sure that reconstruction plans were carried out smoothly mainly through providing sufficient financial support. The government's investment in warfare and reconstruction forced Kublai to adopt policies in favour of commerce which would help increasing revenue.

In response to Kublai Khan's call to develop commerce, a number of Semu officials began to be valued by the government for their superb financial skills. Ahmad was

the most famous one among them. Ahmad came to China as a low-ranking servant. However, his financial skill made him outstanding. Years later, he became an official in charge of economic affairs in the central government. Valued and trusted by Kublai, he finally became a pingzhangzhengshi because of his skill of accumulating wealth, which can be seen in several ways: first, he issued paper currency in quantities for warfare, reconstruction, and reward of meritorious people; secondly, he investigated expenses of government officials, using this chance to take bribes and confiscate the property of corrupt officials; lastly, he also increased the type of taxes and brought more profits for the government. Through the methods mentioned above, Ahmad won more trust from Kublai Khan. Ahmad took the advantage of Kublai's trust in him and began to promote his descendants and officials who allied with him. At the same time, Ahmad pushed aside officials who opposed him, most of which were Han Chinese officials. This further marginalize those Han Chinese officials in the government. (new)

The policy of encouraging commerce increased the reliance of Kublai on Semu officials who henceforth became important officials in the government. However, Han Chinese officials were marginalized because of the same policy. That was mainly due to their opposition to the idea of governing the country through commerce and trades. Their opposition was partly because of their culture. From the time of Liu Che, or Han Wu Di, Confucianism has been the dominant ideology of the Chinese government and officials. Therefore, Han Chinese officials relied on Confucius' thoughts to govern the nation. In Confucian ideology, commerce occupied a very low position. Confucius once said that "a gentleman cares about moral principles, while a villain cares about profits."

Consequently, it was not surprising that Han Chinese officials strongly opposed to commerce-oriented policy. Admittedly, the Song Dynasty was a time when commerce was highly developed in China. However, Chinese merchants could hardly have the opportunity of participating in politics due to their low social status. In other words, Han Chinese people in the government were all opponents of commerce. As a result, divergence and conflict emerged between Han Chinese officials and Semu officials. As Juan Ma has argued "the conflict was due to fundamental difference in value systems, and Kublai had to rely on Semu officials more because he had to encourage commerce." Therefore, Kublai couldn't allow Han Chinese to hold important positions in his government because of their opposition to commerce and trade.

#### IV. KUBLAI'S FEAR OF HAN CHINESE REBELLION

Besides the actual need to encourage commerce, Kublai's fear of Han Chinese rebellion was also an important factor which prevents him from trusting Han Chinese officials.

In the early stages of Kublai's reign, Han Chinese officials were dominant in the government. In fact, 60% of all officials in the government were Han Chinese. Kublai also tried to win common Han Chinese people's support by showing that he was willing to learn Chinese culture though he came from a nomadic tribe on the grassland. His imperial edict of inauguration read that he would "follow the orthodox origin made by Spring and Autumn Annuals and conform to the moral concerns described in Yi." Spring and Autumn Annuals and Yi are both ancient books which had become cultural symbols by the time of Kublai. By saying that he would follow the teachings of these books, he hoped to get the support of Han people. However, to ensure the superiority and power of Mongol nobles and elites, he had to keep his empire away from sinicization. Emperor Shizong of Jin was the first emperor to notice the danger of over-sinicization. In his reign, he found that Jurchens lived in Han Chinese settlement were soon sinicized and assimilated into local Han Chinese community, which was disadvantageous to the Jurchen regime. Therefore, he vigorously restored Jurchen culture and tried to maintain the privileges of Jurchens. As a successor and practitioner of Shizong's way of governing, Kublai also wanted to limit the power of Han Chinese officials, but he had been hesitant to do so at the beginning until two events took place.

The first event that changed Kublai's mind was the rebellion of a Han Chinese official named Li Tan. At the third year of his reign, Li Tan betrayed Kublai and took refuge in Song Dynasty with three cities. More importantly, Wang Wentong, Li Tan's father-in-law, was also found to have participated in this rebellion. As a believer and supporter of Confucianism, Wang used to make great contributions to the empire and thus be appointed by Kublai as Pingzhang Zhengshi, an important and high-ranked position in the government. By collecting and transporting a number of materials and weapons from the Central China, Wang had effectively helped Kublai in the battle against Ariq-Boke. These contributions were significant to the establishment and solidification of Yuan government. Given the past loyalty of Wang, Kublai was unable to accept the fact that he chose to betray him. After this incident, Kublai Khan started to lose his trust in high-ranking Han Chinese officials. From then on, he started to investigate other Han Chinese officials who were

connected with Li Tan and Wang Wentong and kept depriving Han Chinese of official positions. In the tenth year of his reign, Kublai demoted Xu Heng, the chief tutor of nobles as well as the calendar editor, and finally pushed him out of the government. Yao Shu, the designer of national etiquette, was also given a position with no real power. Lian Xixian, the former prime minister of the country, was sent to Liaodong, a remote province. These Han Chinese people who once were important officials lost their positions under Kublai's suspicion.

Another event that had led to Kublai's further alienation of Han Chinese officials was his conflict with Prince Jingim. Jingim was educated by Han Chinese officials since childhood, hoping to implement pro-Han policies and support Han Chinese officials. Therefore, he was hostile to Ahmad. Some Han Chinese officials took advantage of his hostility and killed Ahmad in the name of him. Although he knew the fact that Jingim was a scapegoat in Ahmad's murder, Kublai still showed his dissatisfaction with and distrust of Jingim as well as his fellow subject Han Chinese officials. To make things worse, a Han Chinese official declared after this event that Kublai should hand over the crown to Jingim. This infuriated Kublai. Finally, Jingim was so worried and anxious about how Kublai would respond to such a declaration that he soon died. But Kublai attributed the death of the prince to Han Chinese officials, convinced that it was them who created the suspicion between father and son. Therefore, he became even more averse to Han Chinese officials. After that year, Kublai deprived Han Chinese the opportunity of serving as Pingzhang Zhengshi or at positions that were in higher rankings, the practice of which was also adopted by Kublai's successors. Some depressed Han officials complained that "since the first year of Kublai's governance, countless scholars and masters have been recognized and worked for the government! But from the fifth year on, Kublai has been stupid enough to choose not to trust these talents." Obviously, the distrust of Kublai was a significant blow to Han Chinese officials.

In fact, Kublai had long been thinking about using Semu officials to suppress Han Chinese officials.

For example, Kublai promoted the "four scale hierarchy system" which emerged before his reign. Under this hierarchy system, people were divided into Mongols, Semu people, Hanren (northern Han Chinese and other ethnic groups such as Jurchen and Khitan), Nanren (southern Han Chinese). It is widely agreed by historians that the purpose of this hierarchy system was to stress the priority of Mongolians and degrade subject ethnic

groups. Han Chinese, the most populous ethnic group under the governance of Kublai, were at the bottom of this hierarchy. Obviously, Kublai's goal was to control Han Chinese and prevent them from becoming rebellious. In Kublai's government, the rule of assigning official positions was not strict but still highly depended on this hierarchy system. Mongols and Semu people could assume the office of prime minister, Pingzhang Zhengshi, and positions ranked between these two positions. Han Chinese, according to the rule made by Kublai earlier, were excluded from these senior positions. Therefore, although the number of Han Chinese officials was not less than those of Mongol and Semu officials, Han Chinese could only find jobs in low-ranking positions, and they would never be given the opportunity of holding positions related to policy making. Under this restrictive rule implemented by Kublai, Han Chinese hardly had any chance to become important officials.

### CONCLUSION

Although quite willing to promote pro-Chinese policies and build up Han government structure, Kublai remained conservative and skeptical in appointing Han Chinese officials in his reign. This essay could contribute to the current scholarship about the Kublai Khan's period by providing research of Han Chinese officials which has been largely ignored. For further improvement of this paper, I will integrate perspectives provided by scholars and historians in other countries since this paper uses mainly Chinese resources. Therefore, further research is needed by scholars using the Yuan Shi and Persian sources, including Jami al-Tawarikh, to come up with a better analysis of Mongol ethnic policy.

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